

“Life During Wartime”: How New Wave Music Echoed William Blake

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Abstract: This paper explores the unforeseen parallels between the artistry of William Blake and the new wave music movement. Both Blake and new wave artists like Talking Heads, Blondie, and New Order rejected orthodox conventions, emphasizing radical independence and experimental approaches. Through a discussion of Blake’s illuminated poetry and his critique of socio-political systems alongside new wave’s subversion of consumerism and popular sound, the present essay reveals how both composers used unique artistry and similar lyrical themes to create in a post-insurrectionary climate. Subsequently, Blake’s enduring influence on contemporary art and cultural critique is illuminated.

In *Our Band Could Be Your Life: Scenes from the American Indie Underground 1981–1991*, Michael Azerrad begins with the following quote: “I must create a system or be enslaved by another man’s” (3). Hailing from William Blake’s *Jerusalem: The Emanation of The Giant Albion*, Azerrad’s use of the quote perfectly summarizes the punk and subsequent new wave mentalities the book covers: one must D.I.Y., do-it-yourself, or die; one must create the art they desire, or live regretfully under someone else’s. Sometimes referred to as “the original punk” by critics such as Neil McCormick, Blake not only invented a unique acid-resistant ink mixture to create his copper relief etchings, but he was also incredibly progressive for the late 1700s: he criticized the church and king, endorsed and then denounced the French Revolution, and protested slavery (“Archive Exhibition: Biography”). Emerging from a similar mindset to Blake—breaking tradition, taking unconventional approaches, and emphasizing

the person and their creativity—new wave music evolved from the punk movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s. As Simon Firth describes, bands such as Talking Heads, Blondie, Gang of Four, Elvis Costello & The Attractions, and New Order were anti-consumerism, unconventional, and awkward—focusing on humanistic inclinations and emotions rather than the prevailing “cock-rock” machismo (27). The new wave surged music evolution ahead with unique techniques—just as Blake did with his acid-etched poetry—and surrounded audiences in an authentic sound impossible to ignore or define. By discussing their respective revolutionary inspiration, unique artistry, and lyrical content, the present paper will highlight the parallels between Blake and new wave music in a fashion not yet written upon.

To understand Blake’s influence, one must first understand the degree of which the French Revolution inspired him. Blake’s only poem intended for traditional publication was *The French Revolution* in 1791 wherein his ideas upon the resistance became clear. The text sees Blake welcoming the overthrow of monarchy and the emergence of democracy; King Louis XVI stands for an ageing, collapsing monarchy. The dying king is losing power: “From my window I see the old mountains of France, like aged men, fading away” (286, line 9). As István Rácz describes, “[for] Blake and many of his contemporaries the revolution was an event that put their intellectual revolt into practice” (42). *The French Revolution* was not only a means for Blake to establish revolutionary sympathies and watch his imagined revolt come to fruition, but it also helped him further his complex system of mythology and find the aesthetic qualities that harmonized with his radical ideas (39). Additionally, *The French Revolution* includes similar ideas to another Blake text, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* from 1790. Acting as the voice of the “Devil,” Blake satirizes and attacks the beliefs of Emanuel Swedenborg, a philosopher who published a book on what he believed the afterlife would bring, titled *Heaven and Hell*. Blake also critiques the Bible’s history and the church and state’s ideas of moral superiority (“*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*”). Moreover, Blake

characterizes traditionally Christian restraint as a barrier to spiritual intuition and individualism. The concluding three plates of the text even announce the coming revolution: “Empire is no more! and now the lion and wolf shall cease” (Blake 45). Blake’s biographer David Erdman decreed that *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* “mocks those who can accept a spiritual apocalypse but are terrified at a resurrection of the body of society itself” (163). With the knowledge that *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* preceded *The French Revolution*, a new context can be applied to the latter text: *The French Revolution* represents a social apocalypse coming to fruition (Rácz 44). By referencing his own oeuvre, as he commonly did, Blake connected with the French Revolution by harmonizing myth and history, creating a fuller apocalyptic vision. Because of this fusion, Blake’s composition held a solid moral basis, and therefore remained ripe with inspiration for the picking—or for the instruments of the new wave, for the plucking.

Blake’s mockery of those terrified by genuine revolt suffered an ironic reversal despite his initial support. Now far from its glorious actualization in 1789, the French Revolution raged onwards, and writers close to Blake faced state persecution for their radical views. Joseph Johnson, the man slated to publish Blake’s *The French Revolution*, was placed in prison for issuing materials that condemned political authorities (“The French Revolution”). Moreover, the Reign of Terror—a series of vicious massacres beginning as early as September 1792—initiated Blake’s fearful opposition to the revolution (Fairfax-Cholmeley 8). Blake’s support came to a head when he was indicted for treason after allegedly exclaiming, “Damn the king. The soldiers are all slaves,” to a British soldier trespassing on his property in August 1803 (West Sussex Record Office). Intimidation by the government coupled with growing needless violence finalized Blake’s withdrawal of support for the French Revolution. However, despite his disapproval, his later work remained deeply inspired by what he witnessed in the early 1790s. Texts like *Europe a Prophecy* (1794–1821), *The Song of Los* (1795), and *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion*

(1804–1820) explore themes of revolution by intertwining mysticism and history—something Blake produced clearest in *The French Revolution*.

Similar to how the French Revolution inspired Blake, new wave music was highly inspired by an insurrectionary movement that preceded it: the punk revolution. Like the monarch of Blake's *The French Revolution*, who was "fading away" as the French working class rebelled against him (286, line 9), the punk movement also defied the upper classes who wished to keep "impoverished, violent conditions [...] hidden away" (*Are We Not New Wave* 22). Punk awakened a resurgence of care and anger for the fellow man, specifically the conditions endured under Republican or Conservative rule. As Dick Hebdige notes in *Subculture*, "Punk reproduced the entire sartorial history of post-war working class youth cultures in 'cut up' form," hilariously describing the birth of punk as "safety-pinned together" (26). Additionally, akin to Blake's critique of Christian sexual repression in texts like *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the names of punk bands and artists such as the Sex Pistols and their bassist Sid Vicious revolted against popular music discourse that had historically used sanitized language to censor themes of sexuality and violence that reflected working class realities (*Are We Not New Wave* 22). Former drummer for the post-punk band Mission of Burma, Peter Prescott, described the 1980s as "'sort of a conservative era, money conscious, politically nasty, and Republican [...]. And usually that means there's going to be a good underground [...]. There's something to get pissed off with communally'" (qtd. in Azerrad 9). The underground that Prescott mentions did indeed spawn from frustrations with conservatism, financial greed, and political resistance—quite similar to the conditions that impregnate Blake's *The French Revolution*.

Born under punches, the new wave movement took shape, deviating from punk's aggressive reputation in its offbeat dedication to experiment with lyric and genre. Radio programmers discovered that they could easily mix album-oriented rock classics with Elvis Costello, Blondie, and Talking Heads, all of whom were firmly rooted in the new

wave by the end of 1978; as Hebdige remarks, punk was facing a death by incorporation (96). Punk's demise ultimately spawned the new wave. The corrosion of one style demands the emergence of a new one: whether it be aggressive punk morphing into quirky new wave in the late 1970s, or soured supporters of the French Revolution indelibly inspired by its rebellion in the 1790s. This theory can be applied even on a band-to-band basis. New Order, a classic new wave group, were literally born from the death of Joy Division's lead singer Ian Curtis in May 1980. Out of respect for their late bandmate, the remaining members of Joy Division changed the band's name to New Order and began to experiment musically with new wave synth and song structures.

Since such music could first only thrive outside of the major labels' control, the youth created a do-it-yourself mentality that saw bands booking their own performances as well as recording, mixing, mastering, and distributing their art entirely by themselves (*Are We Not New Wave* 22). This newfound thought—a very Blakean dedication to create, comprehend, and consume independently—"flew in the face of the burgeoning complacency, ignorance, and conformism that engulfed [America] like a spreading stain throughout the Eighties" (Azerrad 10). With the knowledge that the music industry is among the most recognizable examples of cultural influence to young Americans, their rebelling against the major labels meant rebelling against the whole system in general (9).

Similarly, by dedicating himself to creating his own unique acid etchings and poetry, Blake rebelled against the tedious etchings of others that he was forced to reproduce for work from 1772 onwards as an apprentice under engraver James Besire ("Archive Exhibition: Biography"). According to *The William Blake Archive*, Blake's career began as a "journeyman copy engraver, making his living by working on projects for London book and print publishers" ("Archive Exhibition: Biography"). Blake's work in copy engraving continued throughout his artistic career in order to support himself and his wife, Catherine. Around 1788, Blake's deceased younger brother Robert, whom Blake was

incredibly close with in life and death, appeared to him in a vision wherein he taught the older Blake how to use “illuminated writing”—that is, drawing with a special impermeable liquid to create embossed poetry and art upon copper plates, a technique new to Blake and engraving at large (“Archive Exhibition: Biography”). After drawing with the liquid, the plate was soaked in acid, which kept only the letters and patterns drawn with the impermeable liquid embossed (“Illuminated Printing”). The drawing and poems were then hand-coloured, often by Catherine, after the plate was stamped onto paper (“Illuminated Printing”). Moreover, on the topic of illuminated printing, Morris Eaves argues that Blake’s *Jerusalem: The Emanation of The Giant Albion* is a “considered reply to English-school discourse,” which arrives at the “Human Form Divine as [a] figurative alternative to the mechanistic naturalism of orthodox aesthetic harmony” (271). Blake, who detested having to engrave the art of others for work, also disliked those who were the epitome of his trade, much like how new wave bands hated, and created against the grain of, the rock chauvinism that was extremely popular in bands such as Led Zeppelin and The Who in the 1970s. The new wave was rebelling against an identical “orthodox aesthetic harmony” within their own age: “cock-rock” machismo. Catchy quirky melodies, upbeat irregular rhythms, and a variety of instruments not often used in popular music at the time—like tambourines—defined new wave music. The new genre often incorporated electronic effects, drum machines, and synthesizers to produce a futuristic and avant-garde sound. The cultural and political context of the era is reflected in the lyrics of new wave songs, which frequently examine topics of love, relationships, and societal issues.

Upon examining the parallels of their unique artistry, one must also note the lyrical similarities between Blake and new wave music. Talking Heads’s 1980 hit “Born Under Punches (The Heat Goes On)” and Blake’s “London” are incredibly alike. David Bowman—Talking Heads’s biographer—claims David Byrne, the band’s lead singer, wrote the song following the Watergate scandal (179). As Michael

Schudson explains, the debacle occurred after U.S. President Richard Nixon vehemently denied his government's placing of illegal listening devices in Democratic National Committee offices, something of which they were indeed guilty of (1232). Byrne sings of the power that a government has and often violates, like Nixon:

Take a look at these hands
The hand speaks
The hand of a government man
Well, I'm a tumbler
Born under punches
I'm so thin (Talking Heads)

The hands stand for oppression by the government. Byrne, or the speaker, is a *tumbler* because he is intimidated and beaten down by those in positions of authority. He is weak compared to the government's power, and he has little hope of resisting his authoritarian superiors; he is "so thin," so meek (Talking Heads). Byrne attempted to incorporate the Watergate testimony of John Dean, former White House attorney, into the song (Bowman 179). The allusion is audible near the conclusion of "Born Under Punches" as Byrne rambles passionately in layered lyrics. In reference to Nixon and the lies he created to conceal the Watergate scandal, Byrne sings, "Drowning cannot hurt a man / fire cannot hurt a man / Not the government man." Byrne declares that the "drowning" pressure, and the heat felt by wrongdoing, cannot affect the ever-superior "government man." Finishing the song, Byrne sings: "And the heat goes on" in a coda layered over other voices and instruments (Talking Heads). "The heat" or the issues caused by the government, will go on; there is no real resolution to abuses of power. The song is full of paranoia and fear, and an open-ended, uncertain closing suits it perfectly.

Identical to the bleak critique of authoritarian control in "Born Under Punches," Blake closes the first stanza of his 1794 poem "London" writing, "And mark in every face I meet / Marks of weakness, marks of woe" (26, lines 3–4).

These lines come after an allusion to England's government by reference to the English Charter: "I wander thro' each charter'd street, / Near where the charter'd Thames does flow," emphasizing the wide-spread issues London faced in the 1790s (lines 1–2). The marks on every face is potentially an allusion to the Mark of the Beast, a symbol of disobedience in the face of God and a rejection of Jesus's faith. Although Blake may not have meant this in a purely Christian form, the reference signals a loss of faith within Londoners; every face was marked with hopelessness so evil it was ungodlike. Blake follows these lines with "In every cry of every Man, / In every Infants cry of fear, / In every voice: in every ban," again highlighting the widespread fear of London's future, even in a legislative sense as seen in his use of "ban" (27, lines 5–7). Still, the "hapless Soldiers" in Blake's poem cannot help but "sigh," perhaps in pain, dying from a war-caused wound, or in pure despair for their country (line 11). Even in the warm embrace of romance, Blake's Londoners are not safe: They infect one another with "plagues"—an allusion to sexually transmitted infection or disease—and reside in subsequent "Marriage hearse[s]" as ending to Blake's bleak poem (line 16). "London" features similar issues to Talking Heads's "Born Under Punches," even using a similarly uncertain closing. Both pieces leave readers, or listeners, pensive of their governments and futures: encouraging audiences to create, or, at minimum, ponder against the current state of their socio-political morals and structures.

The Blakean nature of the new wave genre spans beyond politics. Blondie's 1978 "Hanging On The Telephone," a song that centralizes sexual frustration, employs the same erotic undertones as Blake does in "The Garden of Love," a poem detailing sexual repression under the guise of natural simplicity (Ostriker 156). Blake opens the poem by describing how a chapel had been built over the plain green garden he once remembered, one where "many sweet flowers bore" (26, line 8). Although it begins inconspicuously enough, Blake speaks of priests "in black gowns" who were "walking their rounds, / And binding with briars, my joys & desires" (lines 11–12). Blake notes that "the gates of this

Chapel were shut" (line 5), potentially using the chapel as a symbol of female genitalia (Ostriker 156). Moreover, Blake's plate design for "The Garden of Love" depicts a priest and two children kneeling at an open grave beside a church ("The Garden of Love"), perhaps representing that his garden of love had been "filled with graves, / And tombstones, where flowers should be" (26, lines 9–10). Blake's flower, or sexuality, has been pronounced dead, surrounded by priests in funeral garb. Blake's sensual desires must remain repressed, as acting on his true sexual feelings will result in disapproval from the Church. "Hanging On The Telephone," covered by Blondie for their 1978 album *Parallel Lines*, suffers through similar sexual repression to "The Garden of Love." Rather than "binding [joys & desires] with briars" (lines 11–12), Blondie's speaker is bound by the telephone wire, forced to submit to their lover's ignorance of their phone calls, joys, and desires. Debbie Harry, Blondie's lead singer, chants, "If I don't get your calls, then everything goes wrong / I want to tell you something you've known all along / Don't leave me hanging on the telephone" (Blondie). Blake's and Blondie's speakers are incredibly desperate to have their repressed sexuality freed from their bounds. Harry thrice cries out, "Oh, why can't we talk again" (Blondie) over the bridge of the song, asking in anguish why her love—so "play[ful]" and "green," just as Blake's was—has died (Blake 26, line 4). By placing their sexuality behind a thin veil, both speakers can express their otherwise socially unacceptable desire. Both instances of repression are vulnerable yet deceptive—hiding the speakers under a guise of Romantic imagery, like Blake, or power-pop double backbeat drumming, like Blondie (*Are We Not New Wave* 141).

The current paper has shown the similarities between Blake and new wave music by examining their radical motivations, original artistic styles, and similar lyrical substance. William Blake himself was a musician; G.E. Bentley, Jr., writes of evidence in *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly* that Blake sung his early poems to his friends, the Mathews, which could explain why his work is felt so strongly in music, specifically that of new wave (1). Blake's words and draw-

ings are pertinent to both the new wave era and contemporary socio-political life; even today, his ideas are still fresh. In a conversation about the political climate of America after the 2016 election, David Byrne refers to Blake's most-cited poem, "And did those feet in ancient time," commonly known as the hymn "Jerusalem." Byrne says, "This is a poem that's talking about the 'dark Satanic Mills,' [...] It's very much looking to the dark side of industrialized England, but at the same time saying, 'What if? Don't we long for something better?'" (qtd. in Pappademas). To "long for something better" not only gave those under the "dark Satanic Mill" hope, but it drove Blake to create unprecedented material on both personal and social issues, just as the new wave recited two hundred years later.

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